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Nation of Islam opposes California vaccine mandate bill

Nation of Islam Minister Tony Muhammad, shown in 2005, likened California's proposed vaccination mandate to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which federal researchers, starting in the 1930s, withheld treatment from African American men. (Damian Dovarganes / Associated Press)

BY PATRICK MCGREEVY

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Reporting from Sacramento — SACRAMENTO — A split among African American leaders on the issue of government-required vaccination has roiled the Capitol as lawmakers consider whether to eliminate most exemptions to state immunization

laws.

A leader of the Nation of Islam has warned African American lawmakers of political repercussions if they support a bill that would require many more children to be vaccinated. A coalition of other black organizations on Monday countered that message with support for the measure.

Nation of Islam Western Regional Minister Tony Muhammad has told members of the California Legislative Black Caucus that they will face a backlash from their community if they support the bill, which may come up for a vote in the Assembly on Thursday.

“That is a traitorous act,” he said of black lawmakers voting for the bill, which already passed the state Senate. “They will not be welcome in the black community if they vote like that.”

The legislation would eliminate parents’ ability to claim exemptions from having their children vaccinated based on personal beliefs.

It was introduced by Democratic Sens. Richard Pan, a pediatrician from Sacramento, and Benjamin Allen, a former school board member from Santa Monica, in response to an outbreak of measles that authorities traced to Disneyland.

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In a recent speech and in an interview Monday with The Times, Muhammad said he and other religious leaders are concerned that some vaccines may harm young African American males.

He likened the vaccine mandate to the government's Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which federal researchers, starting in the 1930s, withheld treatment from African American men who had the disease.

"This happened to us in Tuskegee, and we refuse to allow this thing to happen to us again under the name of health," Muhammad said. "Because they came in the name of health in 1932 ... and watched men die when they had a cure."

Muhammad cited a widely rejected study by one researcher who indicated that there might be a higher incidence of autism in African American boys who receive the MMR vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella.

Several groups disputed Muhammad's comments Monday.

"Unfortunately, recent attacks on the measure have been vicious, unfounded and

distort the science and history of childhood immunization within our community," said a statement by the California State Conference of the NAACP, the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Charles R. Drew Medical Society, the California Black Health Network and the Network of Ethnic Physician Organizations.

"Our organizations denounce assertions that vaccination of black children would be another Tuskegee experiment," the statement said.

The groups said vaccines save lives and there is no reputable science that shows they present a greater health risk to black children.

The issue has generated heated debate for months as hundreds of parents have attended public hearings to protest the measure, arguing that the state should not interfere with their decisions about what medical treatment to provide their children.

When the state Senate passed the measure, those voting for it included Democratic Sens. Isadore Hall of Compton and Holly J. Mitchell of Los Angeles, the two members of the black caucus in the upper house.

On Monday, the African American groups supporting the bill sought to reassure caucus members that Muhammad did not speak for the entire black community.

"As legislative deliberations continue, we hope the California Legislative Black Caucus members know that recriminations against those supporting the bill by opponents do not represent us," the groups said.

"We condemn the targeting of our communities with dangerous misinformation about vaccine safety. We are incredulous that this is being painted as a civil rights issue," the group said.

The caucus issued a statement saying that the bill, SB 277, is good for public health.

“We feel that SB 277 was thoroughly vetted, and we stand by the positions of our individual members on the measure,” the statement said.

Some of the claims of health risk were voiced at a recent town hall meeting by opponents in a community center owned by the Church of Scientology, a venue that led supporters of the bill to question whether the church is behind the opposition.

However, spokeswoman Karin Pouw said Monday that the church has not taken a position on the legislation.

“The event you asked about was held at our Community Center,” Pouw said in a statement. “We frequently make the Community Center available to facilitate the open discussion of issues that are important to members of the community. The church does not take a position one way or the other on SB 277.”

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Patrick McGreevy covered the California Legislature out of the Sacramento bureau until 2021. He joined the Los Angeles Times in 1998 and worked in the City Hall and San Fernando Valley bureaus, writing about subjects including Valley secession, LAPD reform and city government during the administrations of Mayors Richard Riordan, James Hahn and Antonio Villaraigosa. He is a native of San Diego and a graduate of San Jose State University.

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